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ABSTRACT

An English classroom contains both students of differing ideologies (that is, systems complete with centers that both express a desire and relieve anxiety) and teachers with their own ideologies. The potential for conflict is thus present. According to L. Althusser, however, the state provides certain apparatuses that prevent the formation of radically different ideologies, one of which is literature, which creates the reader, the subject. For J. Derrida, on the other hand, an ideology is a logical system, a structure, that is centered on one term of an opposition (such as good-evil) and functions only by ignoring the ennobling power of the other term. F. de Saussure considers language not a system but discourse. If an English teacher regards language as a system that stands outside the speaking subject, then the appropriate mode of instruction would involve drill, correction, and testing. If language is discourse, then the appropriate mode of instruction would involve establishing the class as a discourse community in which all members interact, creating the course and competency through constant practice. A classroom that is a safe place to challenge various beliefs and ideologies prepares students for a world that will often set their values or beliefs in question. (NKA)

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IDEOLOGY AND THE ENGLISH CLASS

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Ideology and the English Class

When a student enters our classes, he or she does so with an ideology intact, that is a system complete with a center that both expresses a desire and relieves anxiety. The system is comfortably grounded in a certitude by having a center that cannot be implicated in the constant play of difference. The certitude, the element that is unquestioned, sits at the center giving the system its power and its ability to control the student's response to the class and what he or she reads. Jaques Derrida in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" argues that we need a center, cannot get along without a center, but he would displace the center by making it a function rather than a being, a reality, or an idea. By making the center a function, the center is opened to the freeplay of the discourse, not carefully guarded as a sacred and unapproachable deity.

We can imagine a classroom in which one student is there to meet a requirement that is necessary for a degree which in turn is a prerequisite for a good-paying job which the student thinks will provide him or her with a rewarding future. The student's world view is caught in a materialistic system with an unquestioned center, a system that will provide the emotional and intellectual framework that not only informs, but in many ways controls, his or her willingness and ability to respond to the class. The same class could contain a born-again Christian whose purpose for taking the class is to get a degree so that he or she can go forth and preach the teachings of Christ to the poor, lost souls.

The second student's world view is caught in a spiritual system with an unquestioned center, a system that informs and controls the student's class response. However each student's responses will contradict in significant ways the responses of the other student.

A teacher steps into our imaginary class. The teacher, however, does not come to the class from a position of absolute neutrality, a position that would enable him or her to lead the students to a clearer view or better understanding of the truth. The teacher drags into the classroom an ideology, a world view, that controls his or her notion of what constitutes appropriate class behavior. For example, teachers tend to assume that students who are gazing out the window are less profoundly moved by the brilliance of the lecture than are those students sitting on the edge of their seats in the front row, an assumption that is not always valid. Of course, we all know that no one would believe in something that he or she thought to be false or inaccurate. Therefore, the teacher and the students hold differing world views, but each would maintain that his or her world view, his or her system, with the only true center, was the only valid world view and the others who believed differently were mistaken, had bought a bill of goods. Each person would, therefore, adhere to an ideology that might come in conflict with each other person's. Louis Althusser, however, argues that the state provides certain apparatuses that prevent the formation of radically divergent ideologies.

Althusser in a key essay, "Ideology and Ideological State

Apparatuses," (1971) argues that literature is one of the apparatuses that reproduce or reconstitute the relationships that are necessary for the continuation of the capitalist system of production. Catherine Belsey best summarizes the argument. "The argument is not only that literature represents the myths and imaginary versions of real social relationships which constitute ideology, but also that classic realist fiction, the dominant literary form of the nineteenth century and arguably of the twentieth, 'interpellates' the reader, addresses itself to him or her directly, offering the reader as the position from which the text is most 'obviously' intelligible, the position of the subject in (and of) ideology"(Critical Practice, 1980, 56-57).

Thus literature acts as a primary apparatus for the prevention of the formation of diverse and conflicting ideologies by creating the reader, the subject. By creating the reader or the subject, the realist text controls the number of possible ideologies available to the reader and as such creates the reader.

Unfortunately, ideology, has a rather wide and diversified set of associations. Frequently ideology is used to mean the world-view of a group. Raymond Geuss in The Idea of a Critical Theory (1981) provides a discussion of the various problems associated with arriving at a clear sense of the implications of the term, ideology. We will not attempt to reach any happy agreement either concerning the possibility of defining ideology or deciding how we can discover what a group's ideology might be because these tend to be problems that lie outside the realm of our discussion. The problems are of course real enough when we consider that to a large extent we are in the business of understanding and perhaps

even modifying the world view or ideologies of our students. However, to spend time straining toward an agreement as to exactly what we mean by ideology or how we discover the ideology of another would require much time and produce little profit. We should remember, however, that ideologies are not simply the content of religious or philosophical systems. Any common knowledge or accepted fact contains an ideology that structures our world and the way in which we react to it.

In Critical Practice Catherine Belsey argues that even common sense implies an ideology. "Common sense proposes a humanism based on an empiricist-idealist interpretation of the world"(7). From the dictates of the common sense world view, the individual is the source and center of all meaning. "Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (empiricism), and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (idealism)" (7). The faith in the empiricist-idealist interpretation leads to a belief that literature is the expression of perceived reality by a creative genius. Language from this perspective can only be viewed as a transparency through which reality was communicated, a pre-Saussurian notion of language. Belsey terms the group of assumptions about reality, literature, and language, "expressive realism," a pre-structuralist category that has at its root the basic metaphysical oppositions that have enabled Western philosophy since Plato.

Barbara Johnson in her translator's introduction to Jaques

Derrida's Dissemination points out the importance of metaphysical oppositions to Western philosophy and by extension Literary Criticism. "Western thought, says Derrida, has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities: good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, identity vs. difference, mind vs. matter, man vs. woman, soul vs. body, life vs. death, nature vs. culture, speech, vs. writing"(viii). To view language as a transparency or as a tool is to put in motion the dichotomies, because to so view language sets language in opposition to thought. In such an opposition language is mere matter, the body, while thought is mind, the soul. Derrida, of course, argues against the privileging of the first term in each of these polarities: good, being, presence, truth, identity, mind, man, soul, life, nature, and speech.

To speak of an ideology is for Derrida to speak of a logical system, a structure, that is centered on one term of an opposition, a center that functions only by ignoring the enabling power of the other term. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" Derrida argues that "it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality" (481). The center cannot be part of the structure because to be so would be to lose its positive identity, to be caught in the play of differences which constitutes the other terms in the system. To be the center of the system and yet not part of the system is to create a system that is contradictorily coherent, and according to Derrida "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of

desire"(481).

To understand the power of Derrida's argument is to accept the view of language set in motion by Ferdinand de Saussure and carried forth by Roman Jakobson. Rather than reiterate the linguistic system derived from Saussure, a brief discussion of his notion of language as a differential system should emphasize the major point. The two primary ideas set forth by Saussure were that the sign was composed of a signifier and a signified, the relationship between which was arbitrary, and that a sign had only a differential identity rather than a positive identity. First, the division of the sign into the signifier and the signified made it difficult to maintain a simple one-to-one relationship between a word and a meaning. Any good deconstrutor will tell you that to look up a signifier in the dictionary does not lead to a signified but to just another string of signifiers, which can in turn be looked up in the dictionary producing not a signified but a string of signs which are themselves signifiers whose signifieds would need to be looked up in the dictionary producing more strings of signifiers. Secondly, the sign's identity is not the attribute of a set of distinct features but the difference between it and the other signs in the system. The sign is not the manifestation of an essence but the product of its relationships to all other signs in the system.

To make matters worse, the individual is no longer given credit as the source of language, the generator of signs. Rather it is language that creates or generates the individual, the speaking subject. Julia Kristeva reiterates Saussure's main points in

"The Speaking Subject" by arguing that "language as a system is articulated through the signifier which exceeds the consciousness of the speaking subject" (On Signs,210). She argues that the other tendency represented by generative grammar rather than structural grammar based on Saussure is to view language not as system but as discourse. Viewed as discourse language involves practice as well as system, and practice enfranchises a speaking subject. The speaking subject "is nothing other than the phenomenological subject which Husserl defined as a transcendental ego. This subject is a logical and even metaphysical postulate which assures the permanence and fullness of meaning"(On Signs,212). We now are looking at the opposition between structuralism and phenomenology that Jacques Derrida uses to unwrite both ideologies. We are also looking at two views of language that are mutually exclusive. To hold one view is to reject the other and vice versa. But most significantly we are looking at reason reaching its on limits, the crisis of meaning in contemporary Western culture.

Any English teacher believes, whether consciously or not, that language is either a system that stands outside the speaking subject and must be mastered by that subject or that language is discourse that can only exist in the process of articulation. In the first instance the appropriate mode of instruction would involve drill, correction, and testing. In the second instance the appropriate mode of instruction would involve establishing the class as a discourse community in which all members interacted, creating the course and their competency in the course through constant practice. In either case the course would perforce

exclude the opposing ideology and would, at all costs, exclude the placing of the two ideologies in a deconstructive opposition to each other because to do so would expose the limits of reason and by extension the limits of authority.

Finally, in the process of learning we are not simply giving our students a group of facts or a body of information. In the real world most people will not need to know why 1066 is an important date in English history. Most people will, however, need to be able to function in an ever changing cultural setting, which will at times put in question their personal centers, their source of security. By making the classroom a safe place to challenge various beliefs and ideologies, the teacher prepares the student for a world that will often set their values and beliefs in question. By deconstructing the possibility of ever having an absolute center, the student is brought to an awareness of the limits of human knowledge, an awareness that should allow him or her to see life and learning as an ongoing process, not as something that ends with the acquisition of a degree.